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ABSTRACT

The loss of small farms in the South was dramatic from 1987 to 1997, with family farming becoming an increasingly rare phenomenon. Small farms are important to the local economic base. They purchase inputs locally, keep the tax base low, and reduce the need for public services. Diversity among farm managers is increasing in the South, with greater numbers of Hispanic and women farm operators. At the same time, only small increases are occurring in the number of African American farmers. Sustainable agriculture advocates have an interest in maintaining niches for small farms and in bringing young people into farming. They point out that well educated small-farm operators are more environmentally responsible. Policy issues include: a need to level the playing field for small farms by developing broad-based national agriculture policy, land use concerns, environmental protection and regulation enforcement, and alternative sources of capital and local financial markets. The major issues facing the small farm are economic--cash flow, income, asset development and protection, and return on investment. These issues must be addressed by federal, state, and local policy. Land grant universities need to commit research and educational resources to address the South's small farms issues. (Contains 14 references.) (TD)

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SMALL AND PART-TIME FARMERS IN THE SOUTHERN REGION

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Southern Rural Development Center
The Rural South:
Preparing for the Challenges of the 21st Century
No. 9, June 2000

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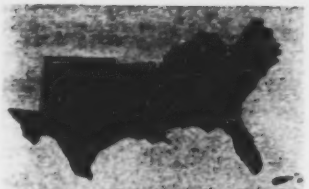

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Small and part-time farmers in the Southern region

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Facts about Small Farms in the South

The agriculture of the South is as diverse as its climatic zones. Dry land, cattle, and cotton in the West cede to soybeans, forestry, hog, and poultry in the East and then South to tropical mountain coffee and banana production. Traditional mainstays like peanuts, tobacco and dairy farms are declining, while concentrated livestock and contract production are increasing dramatically. In terms of income, agriculture in the South demonstrates clear bimodal characteristics. Many farmers remain at the lower end of the scale; some thrive at the upper end while comparatively few work in the middle.

The loss of the small farm in the Southern region has been dramatic from 1987 to 1997. While the total number of farms in this region declined by more than 30,000, the total number of small farms declined by more than 50,000. Table 1 shows small farm populations in the South. Some caution should be used when interpreting the table given the recent introduction of changes in the definitions of small farms. The table uses the $250,000 gross farm income as the small farm threshold. Adjustments should be made for inflation and such factors as "recreational" farming.

A comparatively small number of large farms are responsible for much of the agricultural production in the Southern region, while large numbers of small farms control much of the land and are engaged in a vast diversity of agricultural enterprises. More than 85,000 farms in the South grow tobacco—though not all are small farms. In Oklahoma and Texas, the small farm population has grown as people not involved in agriculture have purchased small farms and have explored a wide range of enterprises to engage in, such as cut flowers, herbs and pastured poultry.

Diversity among farm managers is increasing in the South. Table 2 demonstrates changes among the Hispanic, female, and African-American farm operator

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Table 1. **Small Farm Population in the Southern Region, Gross Sales of $250,000 or Less**

	1997		1992		1987	
	Total Farms	*Small Farms*	*Total Farms*	*Small Farms*	*Total Farms*	*Small Farms*
Alabama	41,384	38,156	37,905	35,266	43,318	41,525
Arkansas	45,142	38,576	43,937	38,763	48,242	44,828
Florida	34,799	31,810	35,204	32,368	36,556	33,962
Georgia	40,334	35,688	40,759	36,844	43,552	40,592
Kentucky	82,273	80,200	90,281	88,725	92,453	91,573
Louisiana	23,823	21,545	25,652	23,892	27,350	26,037
Mississippi	31,318	28,193	31,998	29,357	34,074	32,062
North Carolina	49,406	42,839	51,854	46,956	59,284	56,023
Oklahoma	74,214	71,579	66,937	64,743	70,228	68,588
South Carolina	20,189	18,711	20,242	19,168	20,517	19,746
Tennessee	76,818	74,980	75,076	73,541	79,711	78,635
Texas	194,301	185,865	180,644	173,730	188,788	182,883
Virginia	41,095	38,832	42,222	40,205	44,799	43,366
Region Total	755,096	706,974	742,711	703,558	788,872	759,820
Percent	100	93.6	100	94.7	100	96.3

populations in recent years. For some states, the percentage increase in farm operator diversity is quite dramatic. For example, the Hispanic farmer population has almost tripled, and women list themselves as farm operators 20 percent more in 1997 than they did in 1987. The number of African-American farmers, however, increased by only 374.

For small farms, these trends exist in a context of continued low income from traditional production bases. The end result is that family farming is becoming an increasingly rare social phenomenon. Mainstream agricultural production of commodities has developed as a system that uses very little labor and is very capital intensive. Even large acreage farms producing in the intensive monoculture systems can be handled on a part-time basis. This system has eliminated nearly all aspects of farming except the actual physical production itself so that inputs, transportation, post-harvest handling and distribution to the consumer are out of the farmers' hands, unless they engage in direct marketing of one form or another [9]. As a result, the proportion of the con-

Table 2. **Increasing Diversity of the Farm Population in the Southern Region, All Farms**

	Hispanic Farm Operators			Female Farm Operators			African-American Farm Operators		
	1992	*1997*	*% change, 1992-97*	*1992*	*1997*	*% change, 1992-97*	*1992*	*1997*	*% change, 1992-97*
Alabama	107	187	56	2,886	3,519	22	1,381	1,467	6
Arkansas	131	299	128	3,599	3,886	8	658	679	3
Florida	928	1,060	14	4,851	5,384	11	612	643	5
Georgia	107	312	92	3,456	4,208	22	1,080	1,175	7
Kentucky	207	405	96	7,758	7,411	-5	590	523	-11
Louisiana	202	214	6	1,866	1,781	-6	1,097	1,045	-5
Mississippi	102	149	46	2,519	2,880	14	2,480	2,145	-13
North Carolina	131	320	144	3,940	4,063	3	1,866	1,515	-19
Oklahoma	270	551	104	5,326	6,338	19	556	722	30
South Carolina	62	107	73	1,625	1,992	23	1,765	1,412	-20
Tennessee	198	375	89	6,156	6,898	12	938	893	-5
Texas	6,122	7,796	27	16,630	20,412	23	2,861	3,462	21
Virginia	162	233	44	4,229	4,423	5	1,298	1,127	-13
Region Total	8,729	12,008	38	64,841	73,915	14	17,182	16,808	-2

sumer dollar which actually reach the farmer continues to decline.

Rapidly changing Southern population patterns are resulting in economic and social changes that have influenced agriculture and small farms. The South in the past fifteen years has developed many centers of post-industrial international services, business, and communications. The entire South (except for some Black Belt and mountain counties) is experiencing an in-migration of retirees, while tourism has become the number one industry in the region. The bypassed counties lack tourist destinations, amenities such as motels and restaurants, as well as the new global infrastructure of internet accessibility. Beyond these outposts of persistent poverty, income per capita has increased substantially. The South is no longer a backwater region exhibiting the characteristics of a commodity based "export economy" built on the backs of sharecroppers and tenant farmers. It is modern. It is upscale. It is strong economically. It offers a local market for many diverse agricultural goods and services.

The Issues

- The loss of the small farm in the Southern region has been dramatic from 1987 to 1997, with family farming becoming an increasingly rare phenomenon.
- Small farms are important to the local economic base. They purchase inputs locally, keep the tax base low, and reduce the need for services required by suburban sprawl such as police, fire, and school services.
- Diversity among farm managers is increasing in the South with dramatic expansion of Hispanic and women farm operators. At the same time, only small increases are occurring in the number of African-American farmers.

Policy Issues

- A need to level the playing field for small farms by developing broad-based national policy. Increased research and outreach efforts need to be addressed by land-grant institutions.
- Local policy addressing land use concerns needs to be developed.
- Discussions regarding environmental protection and regulation enforcement need to include small farm representatives.
- Because of the changing structure of the financial system, small farmers will need alternative sources of capital and local financial markets.

Implications

- Major issues facing the small farm are economic–cash flow, income, return on investment, asset development and protection. These issues must be addresses by federal, state, and local policy.
- Land-grant universities need to commit research and educational resources to address the South's small farms issues.

Implications for the Small Farm Population of the South

What are the implications of these changes in terms of the rural South and, in particular, the small farm population that constitutes such a large portion of the agricultural scene of the South? What are the implications of these changes in terms of policy directions? What direction do policy implementers, such as the land-grant Cooperative Extension System administrators, need to take? We can work through a list of these implications as a way of starting the dialogue, while recognizing that much research and discussion needs to occur to clarify and understand the options.

We never really have had a policy about or for small farmers. With the dismantling of the federal agricultural programs, it could be time to try to envision what such a policy ought to look like and who might need to implement it. Certainly, one could ask, "Why bother at all?" Some people believe that production of cheap food is the only justifiable result of agricultural policy and that other goals would be a waste of taxpayer money. Others do not agree. They see the diversity of agricultural systems, including small family farms selling niche and specialty goods and services locally and directly to consumers, as entirely appropriate. Advocates who support small farms point to the report *A Time to Act* [13] produced by the USDA National Commission on Small Farms. They also point to the Goldschmidt's research [3], which showed that small farms have positive economic and social effects on the local community.

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> "We never really have had a policy about or for small farmers. With the dismantling of the federal agricultural programs, it could be time to try to envision what such a policy ought to look like and who might need to implement it."

Across the Southern region, many of the sustainable agriculture groups, which are part of the Sustainable Agriculture Working Group (SAWG), exhibit an interest in maintaining niches for small farmers such as organic, "green label," and locally grown foods. These groups have been important politically in maintaining sustainable agriculture as a program within the USDA. They bring many young people into agriculture and demonstrate ways for new farmers to begin farming without the massive amounts of capital needed for mainstream agriculture. Their ranks include a growing number of new small farmers.

Such individuals also argue that many of the problems facing agriculture in the South are the result of large-scale farming practices. Concentration of livestock (and animal waste) and crop monoculture (without rotations) are agricultural issues that are a function of large-scale industrial agriculture. Thus, well educated and management oriented small-farm operators are considered more environmentally responsible. Protecting the environment is good business, when tourism and retirement are taken into account as complementary industries [7].

Small farm advocates readily admit that economic well-being is the weakest point for small farms. This is especially true for those attempting to derive a significant portion of their family income from farming. Nonetheless, for most small farmers, income is only one of several interrelated family and farm goals [6]. Marketing, value-added processes, enterprises that generate income in several ways (e.g. tourism plus direct sales, etc.), as well as many of the "sustainable community" or "smart growth" issues, address economic viability directly.

If we agree that small farms are very important asset, income, community-based businesses; if we admit that small farmers can be very important partners as we engage in discussions of sustainable agriculture and sustainable communities, then we can proceed to identify the questions of interest—the policy issues pertaining to small farmers that need addressing as the 21st century begins.

Policy Issues

The policy options that follow, while not exhaustive, warrant serious consideration. Many of the issues have not been grounded in research given that such research is seriously lacking. As such, an important policy matter relates to the funding of research on small farm issues. But, there are many others, including the following:

Changes in the structure of agriculture

What can be done to maintain a level playing field for small farms so as to adjust for the changes in production and marketing? The mainstream system is becoming controlled through private contracts and markets are constricted or absent for independent producers. The system is a vertically integrated agro-industrial model, providing financial services, copyrighted inputs, company field production supervisors, contracted market, etc. [1]. Logically, these trends will proceed for the foreseeable future. Therefore, local and state agencies will need to facilitate the existence of independent, safe local market channels, sources of inputs, and public information. There will need to be a commitment of local dollars to meet local farmer needs. At the same

time, USDA "safety net" programs could be better allocated to meet small farm needs. "Under the current system, limited resource farmers with household incomes of $8,600 have the lowest participation rate of any type of farm (19.4 percent) and receive direct payments of $2,200, while very large farms with household incomes of $208,000 have one of the highest participation rates (60.5 percent) and receive direct payments of $32,100 [5]." Small farm policy advocates should recommend changes in this system in future farm bill discussions.

Changes in the definition of small farm

Small farms themselves have changed and will continue to change, a fact that one historian has viewed as the most significant shift occurring in the 20th century [4]. The trend toward agro-industrialism is not going away, but neither are small farms. Agencies, particularly the land-grant universities, will need to undergo some program adjustments in the face of these changes. The census and research issues of the definitional changes of "small farm" as a social category, and the implications for agencies working with this audience, will need careful review.

As a result of the civil rights litigation raised by farmers of African-American heritage concerning their treatment at the hands of various USDA agencies, a national commission was established to consider small farm issues in the United States. In January 1998, the commission released a report entitled *A Time To Act*. The report contained 143 recommendations to the Department to address small farm issues [13]. In its deliberations, the National Small Farm Commission recommended that any farm grossing $250,000 be considered as a small farm, noting that this constituted a threshold for enough income to support a family and as an effective base for modern asset investments. Below that threshold, a farm could not support the family with farm income alone nor could the farmer borrow enough money to secure new production and marketing technologies.

Historically, educational program leadership for small farmers in the Southern region was viewed as the purview of the 1890 land-grant universities. In some states, these programs were provided specifically to African-American farmers. In others, efforts were directed toward a broader small-farm audience. Ordinarily, the definition of small farmer in these land-grant programs involved an income level of $50,000 or less. When program participants were seen as being "limited resource," then additional criteria of "education less than high school," "lack of access to capital," and "being part of a constituency that had experienced discrimination" were added. Since the National Small Farm Commission proposed the new definition, most farms in the South would qualify as "small farm." Thus, the definition of small farms matters greatly to educational program providers. There have been efforts recently that would help operationalize the new definition [8]. In an appendix to the *Structural and Financial Characteristics of U.S. Farms, 1995*, the authors propose various subdivisions within the broad "Small Farm" category. Discussions of such categorizations need 1862 and 1890 land grant-universitiy participation so that agreement can be reached and collaborative programming can continue.

"The trend toward agro-industrialism is not going away, but neither are small farms. Agencies, particularly the land-grant universities, will need to undergo some program adjustments in the face of these changes."

Devolution of government from federal to state and local levels

Big government is diminishing and local government is increasing. Major changes have occurred in the government relationship with farmers. The USDA program was changed dramatically with the Freedom to Farm Act. Federally funded personnel support has fallen almost ten percent in the last five years. There is a clear mood to devolve political power, processes, and personnel away from the Federal level to the state and local levels. In addition, there are important changes in and pressures on land-grant universities as public research and extension funds continue to be restricted. Politicians are elected by attacking "big government" and by calling for tax reductions. Both these spell trouble for the U.S. Department of Agriculture. State and local government will need to step forward and take up the slack in terms of agricultural policy for farmers. For example, Missouri has developed its own "producer grant" process to help small farmers develop sustainable and alternative enterprises. Marketing, safe foods, environment, and worker protection are areas in which state-level leadership will need to increase. The need for support for publicly relevant research also will increase as USDA and other U.S. agencies' support decreases.

"It is obvious in discussions among sustainable agriculture groups, that the concerns of small farms are best addressed as community development issues."

It is obvious in discussions among sustainable agriculture groups, that the concerns of small farms are best addressed as community development issues. Indeed, small farms are important local economic actors. They purchase inputs locally, keep the tax base low and reduce the need for the services required by suburban sprawl such as police, fire, and school. They provide the "people" character to the landscape of houses, barns, domesticated animals, fields, and churches. They often are key partners for tourism and other service industries. By the same token, groups interested in tourism and eco-issues are very logical partners for the protection of small farm interests. These interests include protection of farming rights; local marketing and value added services, protection of minority land ownership, and other farm preservation issues.

Research and outreach to meet small farm needs

There are several areas in which small farm research questions need focus. For many of the tobacco farms that will be losing a very significant source of income, helping make business decisions to refocus use of resources is essential. Small farm organizations are stepping in and providing educational opportunities to small farms, while the universities hesitate to reconfigure themselves. Farmers do their own research and share the results because university researchers and extension staff are starved for funds to carry out their research and outreach activities. Small farmers are building an experiential information network based on their combined experiences because of the reductions in support from public funds and the lack of work in areas relevant to small farms. Organic research, rotations, sequences of crops and enterprises, and organization of farm and farm partners into cooperatives, are all topics that need addressing. Management issues particular to women have not yet been addressed. One of the issues brought out in both the *Time To Act* report and the *Time to Act Report Card* [14] was the question of "marketing." Unfortunately, the kind of marketing assistance that is

needed is in terms of *business* and *entrepreneurship* development rather than the *economic* understanding of "markets." Rare is the Agriculture Cooperative Extension System that can use the traditional county field crop, livestock, or horticultural agent channels to provide educational and technical assistance to farmers to develop market feasibility and other business development needs.

The changing demographics of the suburban, retirement, and other populations

The policy issues here concern land use and the community—defined both in a limited and a broader way. Land use zoning, property rights, and common good, agriculture in the community, and the use of and conservation protection of rented land are very real issues for Southern agriculture and landowners. The topics of farmland protection and zoning to protect farmland in the community will emerge to encompass small farmers. This will create new partnerships and challenge traditional ones that are being stretched by agro-industrial production practices. Community needs and the need for public support of small and large-scale agriculture will continue to diverge. Communicating about the importance of public support and finding ways to increase leadership skills in the small farm constituency will be an immediate challenge. While the USDA is being downsized, it is also refocusing toward a more cogent rural development policy [10].

African-American farmers have seen themselves as the "canary in the coal mine," warning of impending disaster for all—but expendable in that warning. In all truth, there are not many of the traditional "canaries" left. How can the community survive as Southern without African-American members? What can the institutions, government, and other partners do to encourage new African-Americans to engage in the small farm experience? In the past decade there has been a return to the farm by people, both Black and white, retiring back to the South. Can this return migration be promoted and enhanced through partnerships with communications systems that reach African-American audiences outside the region?

Concerns about the impacts on the environment

Water quality and other environmental issues have emerged as primary concerns in the minds of many Americans. As such, these subjects are no longer subsumed under agriculture but rather agriculture is subsumed under them [11]. There is great public concern about protecting rivers, estuaries and the seas around the Southern regionas well as the distribution of water use rights for agriculture, recreation and ordinary consumers. All these contribute major policy issues that have implications for small farms. While traditional bare-ground cropping enterprises such as tobacco generate substantial soil erosion, small farm sustainable agriculture practices such as cover crops, composting, intensive grazing, green manures and others, all are perceived as being more environmentally benign. Nonetheless, programs that promote the protection of the environment, as well as enforcement of regulations, need to be implemented and small farmers need to be in the process. This includes insuring participation of small farmers in the

"The topics of farmland protection and zoning to protect farmland in the community will emerge to encompass small farmers."

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Soil and Water Conservation District and Natural Resource Conservation Service processes and programs. Small farm participation in the governance, design of rules and regulations, access to cost share, and other benefits, is essential for protection of the assets owned and operated by small farmers.

Land ownership, property rights, the courts, and the common good

It was remarked above that there is an on-going devolution of government and that such agencies as the USDA will probably play less of a role in future agricultural policy issues. Other government agencies will probably emerge as more important factors of farm policy. One of the most important agencies to become more involved will be the court system. Issues of environmental protection, preserving individual land owners' property rights, and attempts to understand the degree to which such rights are absolute or relative to a common good (which will probably be repeatedly defined by the courts in the various cases), will work through local, state, and Federal courts. Liability for food safety, odor control, and animal treatment issues are already significant legal questions. Farm worker protection, land and development right sales, farmland preservation, and water quality rights will probably all be defined by the courts. The policy issues will be decided in a long slow legal process. Engagement of small farmers in this process will be a major educational and resource challenge.

> "Programs that promote the protection of the environment, as well as enforcement of regulations, need to be implemented and small farmers need to be in the process."

Changes in farm financial services

The financial service world is changing as dramatically as the world of farming. Large lending institutions are getting far from the land [2]. They often look at "return on investment" as the sole criterion for lending and other decisions. They probably will steer clear of lending for agriculture production activities, given the traditional low rate of return on such investments. Large farms will probably borrow their operating capital as part of their total package in the new world of contract production and marketing. That will be tied to production of patented and copyrighted genetic material.

Small farmers will need alternative sources of capital and local financial markets. Efforts at "Community Supported Agriculture" (CSA) have just begun to explore these issues by providing market returns before production. Small farmers will have to wade into the small business capital market to obtain venture capital, small operating loans and access to other financial resources. They will have to join or organize self-help lending funds. They will have to prepare business plans based on market feasibility studies, which show cash flow, not just collateral to undergird their loan applications. Very little policy study has been done in the whole area of financial markets for small farms.

Conclusions

In many ways, it can be amply demonstrated that small farmers are very important partners in issues of agriculture pertaining to protecting the environment and in enhancing the quality of our social culture for the Southern region for the foreseeable future. The makeup of the Southern small farm population is changing and becoming more diverse.

Working through the issues of meeting the educational needs of that heterogeneous population is a very real challenge for the land-grant universities in the region.

The fundamental issues facing the small farm are economic ones—cash flow, income, return on investment, asset development and protection. Over the past fifty years agricultural policy has largely been the work of the Federal level. This is no longer the case. The policy that did evolve was built in liberal economic tradition. Economics were sorted out in the marketplace, with some attempt to control supply. Issues beyond that model, such as equity, were ignored on the assumption that they would work themselves out. That assumption, at least for African-American farmers and landowners, has been proven false, time and time again. Given the past failures, as well as new concerns about the environment around us, not just for us but for future generations; much policy work needs to be done. That work is going to have to be done within the region. Institutional commitment to address the regions small farms issues will go far toward sustaining the Southern farming community—economically, environmentally and socially. Federal partners, as well as state legislatures, departments of agriculture, and non-governmental organizations need to address small farm issues for the good of the South.

"The fundamental issues facing the small farm are economic ones—cash flow, income, return on investment, asset development and protection."

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